A PROPOSED SYNOPSIS FOR Ph.D THESIS

Entitled

Ecofeminist Discourse in the Novels of Amitav Ghosh and Ursula K. Le Guin

IN ENGLISH

IN THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

For

Submission to

LALIT NARAYAN MITHILA UNIVERSITY,

Kameshwar Nagar, Darbhanga, Bihar

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

The fallacious understanding of progress creates imbalance in nature. It later turns into water pollution, sterilisation of soil, bad air quality, depletion of Ozone layer, greenhouse gas emissions. It leads to oceanic dead zones, loss of biotic flora and fauna, loss of human lives, floods, avalanches, heat waves and landslides. It mostly adversely affects the marginalised section of the society specially the women, the children and the poor.

The present research work aims to study the effects of disturbances in the course of nature on above section mainly women in the light of ecofeminism.

It aims to explore the relationship between women and nature; and assess the impacts of industrialisation on nature. It aims to study the role of culture, ideologies and patriarchy on the treatment of women and nature. To achieve these objectives an exhaustive, comparative and qualitative study will be done using analytical, critical, descriptive, evaluative and interpretive methods. For this purpose, the research aims to study *The Hungry Tides*, *Gun Island* and *JungleNama* authored by Amitav Ghosh; and *The Dispossessed*, *The Word for the World is Forest* and *Always Coming Home* authored by Ursula K. Le Guin.

Keywords*: Culture, Deforestation, Ecofeminism, Ideologies, Industrialisation, Nature, Patriarchy, Women*

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TITLE

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INTRODUCTION

"Nature is a feminist issue."

(Karen Warren)

"Ecofeminism" as a term was coined by Francoise d'Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort* (Feminism or Death). According to her:

> Ecofeminism is concerned with the exploitation and domination of all marginalised groups, including women, children, poor etc. to the exploitation and domination of the nature, including animals, land, water, earth, forest etc. (198).

D'Eaubonne presents ecofeminism as a new humanism. It presents a new way of life for "feminine masses" in an egalitarian society where power does not shift from men to women rather it disappears and everyone becomes equal (194). Academic and professional women had started discussions on linking 'ecology' and 'feminism' in late 1970s and early 1980s in U.S.A.

But it was Ynestra King, in 1987, who popularised the term "ecofeminism" through her article titled *What is Ecofeminism?* in The Nation. She challenged people to examine their belief system. She implied that it is their belief system what makes them exploitative and

oppressive towards women and nature. She pointed out four principles for ecofeminists as which are:

(i) There is a dialectical relation between the subjugation of women and subjugation of nature;

(ii) domination is justified by hierarchy, which must be resisted on all levels, including within ecofeminist political practices;

(iii) diversity must be maintained and domination based on class, race, nationality, sexuality, and privileges, as well as the destruction of whole species and ecosystem must be resisted;

(iv) dualistic thinking, especially that distinguishing between culture and nature, supports domination" (Nelson 216).

The study of ecofeminism establishes that women and nature are two essential existences for humanity. The recent crises like Corona pandemic, Rohingya refugee crisis, Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Hamas conflict, recurring floods, avalanches and landslides all over the world have shown humanity the 'four horsemen of apocalypse' (a biblical term)- Death, Destruction, Pestilence and Famine. Which have caused inflation, food crisis, homelessness, migration and death. And in all these the women, the poor, and children are always at the receiving end, suffering. These four horsemen of apocalypse are either the cause or caused by disturbances in the course of nature. The imbalance between the progress of science and nature leads to deforestation, water pollution, sterilisation of soil, depletion of Ozone layer, greenhouse gas emissions. And all these further leads to oceanic dead zones, loss of biotic flora and fauna, loss of human lives, floods, avalanches and landslides.

In *Tales From the Forest*, Ghosh mentioned, "the basic message of the Bon Bibi legend is that it is essential to place limits on human greed in order to preserve a balance between the

needs of humans and those of other beings." But the greed of technological advancement and the desire to control everything of 'civilised man' exploits women and nature and treats them as second grade. Satirising the logic of 'civilised man' Le Guin says:

> Civilised Man says: I am Self, I am Master, all the rest is Other–outside, below, underneath, subservient. I own, I use, I explore, I exploit, I control. What I do is what matters. What I want is what matter is for. I am that I am, and the rest is women and wilderness, to be used as I see fit (*Dancing* 161).

When nature is affected, women get affected. Women often face greater risks and additional responsibilities due to climate change, especially in impoverished societies. Their roles as care givers to the young and the old, providers of food, water and household energy; and managers of household make them more vulnerable. Societal norms often place a disproportionate burden of climate adaptation and resilience on them. Thus, women encounter unique challenges in the context of climate change. Because of it they need to travel far away to gather daily supplies which exposes them to dangers. It leaves them with lesser time for paid works. It directly links women to nature and establishes a close relationship between them. To vocalise women and nature, ecofeminism uses three basic points- (i). Relationship between women and nature, (ii). Domination of women and nature, and (iii). Patriarchy as the root cause.

The proposed research work aims at studying The Sunderban trilogy consisting of *The Hungry Tide*, *Gun Island*, and *JungleNama* of Amitav Ghosh and three selected novels Ursula K. Le Guin namely *The Dispossessed, The Word for the World is Forest* and *Always Coming Home.*

Amitav Ghosh (since 1956) is a Jnanpith awardee and one of the most eminent English authors of India in the post-colonial era. His works consists of both fictions and non-fictions, putting efforts in disclosing the ecological concerns in India specifically the Sunderban and its

effects on population of the region stretching it to even western countries. He traces nature in his works interweaving legends, experiences, myths and histories; and interlinks women with it. The story of 'Bon Bibi' in his *The Hungry Tides* and *JungleNama* presents women as a saviour of human and forest. While 'Manasa Devi' of his *Gun Island* is represented as the messenger establishing communication between humans and non-humans.

While Ursula K. Le Guin (1929-2018), a prominent 20th century American novelist, poet, literary critic, translator, short story and children fiction author, has established an ingenious world in her Hainish Universe and Earthsea fantasy series. Through her Hainish Universe she explores a world of extraordinary technological advancements and its ecological repercussions. In her novel *The Dispossessed,* we come across the character Keng who talks of planet Terra (The Earth) where the nature is destroyed. In the same novel we see the worlds of Urras and Annares where two different kind of society is established and the women are treated in two different ways. Through *The Word for the World is Forest* we see the domination and exploitation of women on planet Athsea by a colonising force. The main theme of the novel *Always Coming Home* focuses on oppressed women and nature who are shown as inferior to men. It also focuses on domination of women and nature by patriarchy in Condor.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been many works done on Amitav Ghosh's The Sunderban trilogy and Ursula K. Le Guin's present selected works, shedding lights on one or the other aspects of their works.

Sangita Patil and N.S. Gundur analyse Amitav Ghosh's novel "The Hungry Tide" to explore the ecologies of gender. They argue that the novel contributes to ongoing discussions in ecofeminism and the non-human turn by deconstructing gender binaries through an

environmental narrative. The novel depicts the harmonious connection between humans and nature, as well as conflicts arising from contested ecological understandings, such as the tigers versus refugees' episode in Marichjhapi (170-85). P.K. Nayar explores how Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide" uses spectropoetics, particularly the uncanny, to depict the political condition of dispossession. The uncanny, beyond a perceptual state, represents a political context where refugees, dispossessed and marginalised, become spectral figures in unfamiliar spaces (88-119). Elisabetta Zurru has investigated ecostylistics of The Hungry Tides (191). While Divya Anand focuses on its ecocritical impositions (156-71).

M.S.D. Alexandru writes in her article that Gun Island, a metanarrative environmentalist discourse, concludes Amitav Ghosh's exploration from The Hungry Tide. Departing from realism, it embraces fantasy to address the realist novel crisis. Protagonist Deen symbolises humanity's quest for ancient knowledge, guided by diverse, knowledgeable female figures, underlining ecofeminist themes. The novel intertwines climate change, refugees, and mysticism, forming an intellectual project (67-84). Ursula Kluwick in her article argues that through their development of an aquatic language and diluvian imagery, antrhopocene water fictions challenges the limitations of realism that Ghosh identifies in his The Great Derangement (64-78). While Edwin Gibson argues that Ghosh exposes a planetary condition in his Gun Island (269-88). Sanket Kr. Jha in his article depicts ecological concerns present in The Hungry Tide and Gun Island and how climate change is affecting the Sunderbans and forcing its population to migrate (87). Sayantani Sengupta tries to critically study retelling of the Bon Bibi legend through ecofeministic lens in JungleNama and also includes the story of Manasa Devi to substantiate the interconnections between women and nature (106-12).

On the other hand, The Dispossessed of Le Guin has been described by Andre Gorz, a political thinker, as 'the most striking description I know of the seductions – and snares – of all self-managed communist or, in other words anarchist society.' Dan Sabia has explored the

individual and community in this novel (111-28). While Tim Libretti describes it as an imagination of a non-authoritarian society that privileges freedom (305-20).

The article by Sneharika Roy discusses how Ursula Le Guin's novel "The Word for the World is Forest" was influenced by the Vietnam War's impact on both human and nonhuman environments. Le Guin presents contrasting framework for understanding human and nonhuman differences: Terran industrial capitalism, characterised by physical and symbolic violence, and Athsean ecosocialism, which is based on an ethical commitment to non-violence and a focus on the forest. The article explores the novel's exploration of these systems, providing insights into Le Guin's commentary on the consequences of war and her perspectives on environmental ethics (446-56). Carol P Hovanec explores The Word for the World is Forest as mirror of the American consciousness. Ian Watson explores it as ecological imbalance and emotional imbalance. He treats 'forest' of the book's title as a metaphor for mind (231-37).

D.A. Abdullah and A.H. Sharif provides an ecofeminist analysis of Ursula K. Le Guin's significant novel, Always Coming Home (1985). Focused on the feminist protagonist in the contrasting realms of Kesh and patriarchal Condor, it explores the oppression of women and nature, depicting them as inferior to men. Through the experiences of the heroine, Stone Telling, the interconnectedness of women and nature is examined. The research delves into the profound ecological consciousness of Kesh society and the degradation of Condor society. It underscores the importance of equality in addressing ecological and feminist concerns, emphasising that the active involvement of both genders is crucial for the protection of nature (232-44). I.A. Hanafy also examines various cultures from an ecofeminist perspective. This includes the environmentally conscious Kesh, the rigid and hierarchical Condor is seen as contrasting the Kesh, and the destructive technology of modern American culture. Le Guin explores key ecofeminist debates, addressing issues such as the oppression of women, patriarchal systems, and the abuse of animals and the environment. The depiction of these

cultures aims to illuminate cultural disparities through an ecofeminist lens, emphasising the importance of human respect for the Earth and recognising the interconnectedness of all life.

Going through all these research works it can be seen that there has been a good amount of research work on both of the authors' individual works. But they have not been analysed and interpreted in the light of ecofeminism together. There has been no comparative study of Ghosh and Le Guin. The cultural and ideological effects on women and nature have not much been analysed in the selected novels. So, the gap remains and it will be the concern of this research to fill this gap.

HYPOTHESES

(i) Technological advancements due to industrialisation and mechanisation have affected women and nature.

(ii) Patriarchy and -isms are the root cause of subjugation of women and nature.

(iii) Amitav Ghosh and Ursula K. Le Guin both suggest the balance between science and nature is the answer to climate change and problems arising from it.

(iv) Degradation of nature parallels the subjugation of women.

(v) Women's agency is integral to environment harmony.

OBJECTIVES

(i) To explore the relationship between women and nature through present texts.

(ii) To assess the impacts of industrialisation on nature.

(iii) To study the role of culture, ideologies (present in book) and patriarchy on the oppression of women and nature.

(iv) To study the treatment of women and nature in the selected novels of Ghosh and Le Guin.

WORK DESIGN

It will be a qualitative study of selected texts by using analytical, critical, descriptive, evaluative and interpretive methods. It will be a comparative study of Ghosh and Le Guin as well under the ecofeminist theory.

The research will be based on primary data which consists of *The Hungry Tides*, *Gun Island*, *JungleNama*, *The Dispossessed*, *The Word for the World is Forest* and *Always Coming Home.*

For secondary data, the already published works will be used.

Qualitative research is concerned with words, images, symbols, concepts and their meanings. These meanings are achieved by persons in lived social situations. So, the research of this kind, can't be totally objective, detached and unbiased. While quantitative research demands all of it and is concerned with quantifiable data, it will be of no use here. Because this research will be a study of meaning. Therefore, it will be the best to use qualitative research methodology as the research methodology.

RESEARCH COVERAGE

My research coverage will be limited to The Sunderban Trilogy consisting of *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Gun Island* (2019) and *Jungle Nama* (2021) of Amitav Ghosh and *The Dispossessed* (1974), *The Word for World is Forest* (1976) and *Always Coming Home* (1985) from Hainish Universe of Ursula K. Le Guin.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIELD

Since its origin in 1960s ecofeminism has come a long way and has broadened its scope. Literary texts too have broadened in their perspectives and concerns regarding ecofeminism. Amitav Ghosh and Ursula K. Le Guin have been very subtle in approaching ecological concerns in their works. The migration and loss of humans, cetaceans and crabs; the change in the density of rivers and its courses; the rise in the level of sea, spread of oceanic dead zones and shipworms emphasises Ghosh's ecological concerns pointing out exploitation of nature and marginalised gropes. While rise in seas level, deforestation, contrast of anarchism and archaism, draughts caused by industrialisation and mechanisation; and rape of women and nature are the main concerns of Le Guin's speculative fiction.

This proposed research will explore the different aspects of ecofeminism which has already been explored by many prominent authors like Val Plumwood, Greta Gaard, Carolyn Merchant, Karen Warren, Vandana Shiva, Judi Bari etc. but not in the context of Amitav Ghosh and Ursula K. Le Guin. So, this research will explore the concerns like patriarchy, anarchist, capitalist, authoritarian and cultural oppressions of women and nature. It will explore the relationship and interdependence of women and nature in present works.

STRUCTURE OF THE RESEARCH WORK

This proposed research will tentatively be divided into six chapters which are as follows:

Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter Two: Literature and ecofeminism

Chapter Three: Nature, women and culture in the selected texts

Chapter Four: Ghosh and Le Guin: A study in contrast

Chapter five: Conclusion

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